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ABSTRACT

Until writing researchers understand how students respond to teacher marking techniques in composition, they risk prescribing strategies that waste teachers' instructional time. For this reason a study with a participant/observation methodology was conducted to describe and interpret student responses to writing instruction methods. The five-month study of an eleventh grade class included observation, occasional participation by the researcher in teacher planning and class activity, interviews with teachers and students, and interpretive analysis. The research revealed that students attended selectively to teacher commentary and also used different sources of information, such as assignment directions or teacher feedback to help generate and edit their compositions. Students who wanted to get good grades or be favored by the teacher construed teacher commentary as absolute judgment on the worth of their performance. Internally motivated students appeared to interpret teacher remarks as information to be used in developing not only their writing, but their personal and social competence as well. The findings suggest that revision guides are useful only for assignments that are motivating. Revision research cannot ignore the processes and contexts of writing if it is going to help develop courses with real meaning for composition students. (HTH)

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INTERRELATIONSHIPS OF STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND THE REVISION PROCESS

PAPER TITLE:

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"EVALUATION AND REVISION:
A FIELD STUDY INTO STUDENT
WRITERS' USES OF TEACHER
EVALUATION"

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Dennis Searle and David Dillon, in an October, 1980 Research in the Teaching of English article, appeal to composition researchers to investigate what it is teacher evaluation actually communicates to student writers.

Searle and Dillon state: "A final, central, and most difficult consideration is the question of how responses affect pupils. We need to determine what effects specific types of responses have on pupils' writing. We need to know how pupils interpret the responses they receive."¹ We need as well, contend Searle and Dillon, to widen our observational lense so that teacher commentary and students' response to it can be related to other classroom events. In this paper, I would like:

- First, to explain why the research focus Searle and Dillon advocate is important.
- Second, to detail one viable method for gathering information on pupil responses to and interpretation of teacher evaluation.
- Third, to review the results of a field study I conducted into student use of teacher evaluation, and
- Fourth, to discuss three implications of my research.

Throughout the paper, the perspective from which I approach revision is that of the classroom instructional setting in general and teacher evaluation in particular. In contrast to Lily Bridwell's dissertation research into twelfth graders' revising processes, which sought results independent of instructional influence,² I am concerned with student revision in its naturalistic context, that is, as an activity which occurs in response to teacher evaluation, overall learning environment, and previous personal experience with school-sponsored writing.

The importance of Searle and Dillon's call for research into students' interpretation of teacher evaluation I think is readily apparent: Lacking such research information, we can only guess at what makes for effective evaluation. The consideration is a practical one: Until we understand how particular students in individual classrooms respond to clearly-delineated teacher marking techniques, we run the risk of prescribing strategies which simply waste teachers' instructional time. In the process, we may also encourage teaching which truncates or distorts students' revising activity. In any event, at the present moment, I think we would agree that very little is known about students' own perceptions of their uses of teacher evaluation.

We have ample evidence showing that teachers devote the vast majority of their comments on student papers to the identification and correction (but not analysis) of writing errors in mechanics and usage. Teachers who mark in this way implicitly equate quality writing with error-free writing. They also suggest—and mistakenly so, I think—that a concern with these surface features of discourse will make writing happen. This is not unlike classical rhetoricians insisting that purpose is what instigates and shapes the writer's performance. How do we know unless we ask? Searle and Dillon, in calling for a focus on students' own interpretations of teacher evaluation, point out the way for drawing up a more meaningful and phenomenologically valid picture of students' composing activity.

A second point of significance I see in the research focus advocated by Searle and Dillon is that an accumulation of contextually oriented studies of the sort the authors call for promises to make writing research more accessible to practitioners. The secondary school teachers with whom I have worked during the last six years as a rule do not read research.

Those who do find the bulk of it incomprehensible. Of course, there are those teachers who persist and who do read and try to apply research. In their case, however, there is frequently a confidence-shattering disjuncture between what research says will occur in practice and what in fact does take place when teachers attempt to implement promising new strategies. Why do these breakdowns occur, we ask? Well, there are certainly problems in the translation of research to practice, difficulties that the teacher has in making sense out of how the research fits the classroom. Yet the source of the problem resides with researchers who either fail to provide adequate descriptions of their research context in the first place or naively assume that a laboratory setting approximates classroom realities.

Extracting learning from its context distorts naturally occurring events. Behavior in experimentally manipulated conditions will not match that of activity in the everyday social world. Moreover, writing, the evaluation of it, and revising, while individual acts, are really social in nature, if we are to believe Vygotsky, who argues that writing is not a sum of motor skills but rather a complex cultural activity. Writing springs from the interactions originating between people, and these interactions are subsequently reflected in what is written and then read by people. Adequate understanding of classroom learning, to quote Elliot Mishler, "can only be provided through information about contexts of behavior; the subject matter taught, the physical setting of the classroom, the personal 'front' of the teacher, and student opinions and interpretations of teacher behavior."³ We would benefit from descriptions of individual writing development as it unfolds in situ, where exchanges of meaning originate.

Researchers talk a great deal these days about a "paradigm shift." Thomas Kuhn of course popularized the phrase, although Kuhn himself was not

absolutely certain of the meaning of the word paradigm, defining it as he did twenty-two different ways in his The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. We do know from Kuhn that in the sociological sense of the word, paradigm means "...the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by members of a given community."⁴ What happens, according to Kuhn, is that scientists who share the same values and orientation toward inquiry come to pose similar problems and adopt identical methods for solving these problems.

When we look at research into writing, we see that up until the early 1970's a positivistic paradigm dominated the inquiry. Teacher and student account of their experience of composition curricula rarely appeared in the literature. Research emphasized measurable behaviors and quantifiable products. School writing research concentrated on surface feature error in students' written products. Researchers implemented interventions intended to reduce number of errors made. Writing was conceived in atomistic and purely quantitative terms. Hardly any research examined writing agents, that is, students themselves. Students' own renderings of their performance were generally ignored—or at least omitted from research reports. More importantly, perhaps, in almost every instance, researchers failed to comment upon the contexts in which writing occurred.

We have learned that understanding how student writers write requires us to observe them in the act of composing. The case studies of writers at work by Emig, Stallard, Mischel, Sommers, Flowers, Perl, Graves, and others provide us a body of information from which a host of interesting questions on revision and other dimensions of the composing process can be generated. But prior to Emig's landmark study, researchers were so locked into a positivistic, product-based paradigm that they didn't even ask

questions about how and for what reasons students revise their composition. Researchers studying assessment displayed an overwhelming bias to examine it from teachers' point of view only. In so doing, researchers misrepresented the interactive basis of learning composition.

Contemporary non-positivistic research by Emig, Florio and Clark, Sandra Worsham, Marie Nelson, and Shirley Brice Heath has yielded fruitful results.⁵ To varying degrees, these researchers; have consulted writers directly, examined contextual impact on writing performance, and tried to construct nonstatistical, descriptive "inside-out" accounts of the composing process for the purpose of generating tentative hypotheses about writing activity. Research, then, on the one hand is experimental study carried out by detached observers who produce a collection of facts on isolated phenomena often represented in statistical terms and numerical equations designed to predict (and thereby in some fashion control) future behavior. But research can also be immersion in natural settings by investigators who participate in those settings, describing and interpreting interdependent events in narrative form with the intention of enhancing our understanding of dynamic, creative human processes.

The ethnographic technique of participant-observation obviously has its roots in the latter conception of research. Participant- observation acknowledges that a continuing interpersonal state of affairs exists between teacher and pupils. Individuals' knowledge, perceptions, and evaluations of one another color their interactions and behaviors. In the area of student revision of writing, this means for the participant-observer that it is not teaching methods per se or lexical, semantic, and syntactic changes which students make from one draft to the next that serve as objects of study.

Instead, student response to teaching method and student explanation of the alterations they make in their writing become topics for study, augmented by researcher explication of these events.

Sociologists and anthropologists have been using participant-observation methodology for decades. Participant-observation, as McCall and Simmons point out in their twelve year old text on the topic, is not a single, unitary method but rather a style of research.⁶ Participant-observation is characterized by at least three distinct features: (1) The researcher him or herself is the instrument of inquiry; (2) The inquiry is initially somewhat unstructured in design, placing a premium on description and discovery (as opposed to a verification); (3) An attempt is made to portray research participants' understanding of events at participants' own level of meaning, what we call "emic" representation.

In the five-month study I conducted into eleventh-graders uses of teacher evaluation, participant-observation entailed regular observation of class lessons, selected video-taping of those lessons, occasional participation in both teacher planning sessions and class activity, teacher and student interviewing, informal conversation with research participants, and interpretive analysis of both student audio-tapes and writing as well as teacher written assessment. As a participant-observer, I assumed the role of a class member who actively participated in the social structure of the classroom and also developed over time significant relationships with the teacher and students. The study was not directed by a formal hypothesis nor limited to findings emerging from the application of a predetermined set of investigative instruments. The ongoing natural flux of classroom events guided my research, and I myself was the major instrument of research.

I say major because in this project the classroom teacher whose class I studied served as a co-researcher. Teacher collaboration—on behalf of Ms. Fran Spratley—was included as an essential component of the research methodology. Fran assisted in collection and interpretation of evidence. She helped me to develop perspectives on individuals' personalized revising strategies by raising and formulating research questions. She read my field notes and research write-up, adding information and suggesting revisions that she thought would add accuracy and comprehensiveness to our work.

I realize, of course, that participant-observation and collaborative study on the face of things violate some of our most tenaciously held beliefs about good, detached scientific inquiry. Questions concerning subjectivity, reliability, the dreaded Hawthorne effect and the like immediately come to mind. But persuasive rejoinders exist. In educational research, Elliott Eisner's and Gail McCutcheon's work on these matters is especially illuminating.⁷ A case can be made for collaborative research on its own terms. For now, suffice it to say that the benefits of collaborative research, namely, the dual insight it gives into students' composing strategies, the uninterrupted record of class proceedings it yields, the contribution to both researcher and teacher professional development it makes, and the realistic compensation it offers (results having meaning for practice because they are a consequence of inquiry under life-like circumstances)—all these factors make collaborative research an attractive methodology. Researchers at the Institute for Research and Teaching and teachers and researchers from the Bay Area Writing Project⁸ have offered several papers articulating the usefulness, rigor, and power of collaborative research.

Now let me move on to highlight some of the findings of my research. I should say at the outset that in my research I aimed to disclose the manner in which individual pupils experienced teacher evaluation on their writing. Thus findings on students' revising strategies relate only secondarily to product-level changes students made in their discourse. The primary area of concern was to detail the nature of students' revising behavior—to describe their reactions to teacher commentary, to try to determine what elements of that commentary influenced what students and in what ways, and to attempt to explain why students' revised as they did (given their activity, insight into it, and an analysis of what they produced).

To set the scene: the collaborating teacher in this project took an interactionist approach to teaching composition, rejecting rehearsal of writing rules in favor of dialogical practice in speaking, listening, reading, acting, and writing. Students were asked from the outset to compose whole pieces of discourse. They had only four major writing assignments during the semester, but were asked to compose several drafts of each. Committing errors and writing badly were viewed as acceptable steps in learning how to write well. Fran evaluated student work formatively. Not all writing was graded, and peer tutoring was common. Fran did not assign her students a textbook. Students' own writing served as texts for the course. Fran regarded evaluation as an activity which could empower students to revision their writing by enabling them to discover personalized strategies for developing their individual composing processes.

The class that Fran and I researched was a one semester intermediate expository composition class situated in an integrated Columbus City high school, grades 9-12, with a student population of around 1300 pupils.

The class was heterogenous in make-up. It was composed of thirty-one students, thirteen female and eighteen male, twelve black and nineteen white. Twenty-two of the students attended various vocational schools in the morning where they took such courses as horticulture, auto mechanics, law enforcement, and cosmetology. The vocational students bused to the high school during mid day, arriving by sixth period to finish out the afternoon. For our purposes today, it is important that you get a sense of the overall instructional situation: Fran had about ninety periods of a maximum fourty-two minutes in length each in which to teach the fundamental skills of expository writing to thirty-one sixteen and seventeen year olds who ranged widely in ability, scholastic achievement, vocational interest, and cultural heritage.

The study demonstrated that student use of teacher evaluation in the interactionist class is a dynamic activity and not a simple matter of automatic pupil response to one-dimensional teacher stimulus. The research revealed that students attend selectively to teacher comentary and also use different sources of information—class activities, assignment directions, in-class teacher feedback etc.--to help them generate and edit their composition. A dominant factor appearing to influence students' uses of teacher comentary was the writing motivations students brought to composing tasks. In this class, at least four such motivations could be detected: to get (good grades), to be (model students), to do (more competent writing), and to become (more fully realized individuals).

This motivational scheme fit with Fran's understanding of the factors she deemed most critical in shaping students' writing performance. Students themselves often discussed their writing and revising activity in precisely these terms. By way of example we will look for just a moment at Kim, Phillip, Laura, and Geri.

Kim explains that her past experience with English teachers has taught her that "they [think they] know it all and you write to what they know." Although Kim believes Fran is "more open-minded," out of force of habit, Kim revises to "get it right," concentrating almost exclusively on correcting the surface feature errors in her writing at the lexical level. She is by her own report most interested in getting good grades.

Phillip also cares about grades, but his primary motivation appears to be one of earning the teacher's approval. Phillip tries to "psyche out" teachers, to discover what it is they evaluate positively, and to then produce that kind of work. Whenever Fran shares her writing with students, not for the purpose of modeling it but with the intention of unveiling herself as a writer to her students and examining with them her own composing process, Phillip nonetheless seizes the occasion to sense what it is Fran values. He then goes ahead with his own revision, doing, he tells me boastfully, "just what she's done," primarily for the purpose of eliciting Fran's praise.

By contrast, Laura's use of Fran's commentary as manifest in her rewrites and patterns of class behavior in combination with Laura's own report on her use of teacher commentary leads one to conclude that she is chiefly motivated by a desire to attain a higher level of writing competence. Laura contends that Fran's evaluation is a "problem solving aid;" and she tries to capitalize on Fran's typically extensive commentary literally to do better writing, changing her writing not only at the word but at the sentence and paragraph levels as well.

Finally, Geri, who writes on her own outside of class, composing letters, poems, diary entries, doodles and the like, revises to help her derive new insight. Geri herself notes that she is not motivated to use Fran's feedback to correct her writing. Rather, Geri values the substantive comments because

they assist Geri in her struggle to become a more highly stylized communicator and a more—to quote Geri—"self-enlightened individual."

Individuals who want first and foremost either to get good grades, or to be favored students—the motivation in both instances is extrinsic—construe teacher commentary as absolute judgement on the worth of their performance. These students literalize teacher commentary. Teacher evaluation is a matter of punishment or reward. Internally motivated students, on the other hand, appear to interpret teacher remarks as information to be used in developing not only their writing but their personal and social competence as well. Generally speaking, internally motivated students favor loosely structured learning exchanges while externally motivated writers prefer a directive, tightly structured teaching—learning situation.

I should note that students were not always driven by a single motivation. Nor were motivations the same in kind necessarily identical in degree. And in this class, internally motivated pupils were not always better writers than their extrinsically motivated student counter. The point is that Kim and Phillip and Laura and Geri understood themselves to be performing in distinct ways and for different purposes. Their actual revision activity varied accordingly.

Fran and I discovered that students displaying different motivations used different sources of information to guide them in their rewriting work. Students who wanted to get good grades or to be model pupils typically sought in Fran's evaluation pat prescriptions leading to "correct" expression. When these students could not locate this information in Fran's remarks on their papers, they attempted to get it from her in face-to-face conversation. This group of students looked to Fran's evaluation to provide

ready-made solutions to their writing problems. They most often reacted to the most immediate, visible features of Fran's evaluation. From one assignment of the next, they keyed-in on Fran's most literal, directive comments appearing on their papers. On occasion they turned to Fran's assignment directions or her own writing samples to see them through the required writing task. Meanwhile, other pupils in the class based much of their rewriting on learnings they acquired from Fran's classroom instruction. They would make significant theme level changes in their writing as a result of a strategy or skill they acquired in one of the multiple classroom activities Fran typically conducted between draft writing assignments. Still other students acted in independent ways, rarely referring to any facet of Fran's instruction that could conceivably contain some evaluative content. The distinction I want to make here is that those students operating with a to get or a to be motivation used a much narrower band of Fran's curriculum than those writers we categorized as to do/to become sorts of students, writers who brought intention to the revising task. In the former instance, writing arose out of a need to secure an extrinsic reward, whereas in the latter situation writing and revising emerged from a desire to communicate a particular message.

In concluding, there are three common sense implications of this research that I would like to share: first, researchers and practitioners alike are devoting considerable attention nowadays to trying to help students elaborate their revising activity by using revision guides and forms. My research suggests that this approach will benefit students only if we simultaneously deal with the question of supplying students motivating occasions to write. We need also to explore ways to develop in pupils the capacity to more consciously attend to the total array of teachers' instructional fare.

Secondly, revision research which analyzes student products only and not the processes and contexts out of which these products emerge, if it is intended to guide practice, must be rejected as incomplete research. I recently heard one researcher discuss a study he conducted into revision in which he found that all but a few students benefited from his experimental treatment, which amounted to extensive guided revision work. The researcher was puzzled, disturbed even, because on closer scrutiny he discovered that good students' writing was in fact suffering from the revision schedule which he had implemented in several secondary school classrooms. Fortunately, the researcher thought to consult the good students, who explained to him that after a certain point his revision schedule became a nuisance to them, since they had already achieved a polished product. At any rate, the researcher labeled the skewed scores of the proficient students "an artifact of the research." It is of course just these types of so-called "artifacts" which demand our attention. Methodology which dismisses critical variances in performance as artifacts or, as in the case of researchers Robert Marzano and Sandra Arthur, leads researchers to conclude that teachers can make as few or as many comments of any type they wish on students' written work without affecting a difference in students' writing achievement,⁹ is suspect.

Thirdly, while the study of student interpretations of their composing activity is fraught with possible contaminants traditional researchers labor to avoid, the enterprise can be productive, especially if carried out in collaboration with practitioners. The process of questioning students about their educational experiences within a collaborative research context can be valuable to researchers, teachers, and students. Such inquiry will in the long run enable us to design courses which can have real meaning for our composition students.

NOTES

1. Dennis Searle and David Dillon, "The Message of Marking: Teacher Written Responses to Student Writing at Intermediate Grade Levels," Research in the Teaching of English 14 (October 1980): 242.
2. Lillian S. Bridwell, The Revising Processes in Twelfth Grade Students' Transactional Writing. Unpublished paper, The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1980. Bridwell writes "[Writing sessions]...were held early in the school year to avoid instructional influence on accommodations to individual teachers' preferences": 11.
3. Elliot G. Mishler, "Meaning in Context: Is There Any Other Kind?" Harvard Educational Review 49 (February 1979): 7.
4. Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970): 175.
5. See Kenneth Kantor's "Research in Composition: What It Means for Teachers" for a summary of much of this research. English Journal 70 (February 1981): 64-67.
6. George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons, Issues in Participant-Observation: A Test and Reader (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Publishing Co., 1969).
7. Elliot Eisner The Educational Imagination (New York: Macmillan, 1979). Gail McCutcheon and Diane Kyle "Collaborative Research: Development and Issues" unpublished paper, The Ohio State University, 1980.
8. Susan Florio and Martha Walsh, The Teacher as Colleague in Classroom Research (East Lansing MI: Institute for Research on Teaching, 1978). Patrick Woodworth and Catharine Keech, The Write Occasion (Berkeley CA: BAWP, 1980).
9. Robert J. Marzano and Sandra Arthur, Teacher Comments on Student Essays: It Doesn't Matter What You Write. Denver, Colorado: ERIC, ED 147 864, 1977.